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Harbor's extra sand used to cap pollution

STRYKER BAY: A nearby, inexpensive supply of sand from harbor dredging will help fill a superfund site.

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Got sand?

The folks dredging Duluth's shipping channel have plenty, and they've found a good way to dispose of it.

The process of filling Slip 7 in the West Duluth harbor with sand to permanently cover contaminated sediments has been pushed into high gear thanks to downstream dredging.

The capping project - part of the four-year, \$48 million Stryker Bay Superfund site clean-and-cover project -- is using sand from harbor dredging near the Blatnik High Bridge.

Shipping channels are regularly dredged to ensure the channels are deep enough for ore, coal and grain carriers. And most of the material pulled from the bottom is sand.

The windfall of cover material, combined with mild fall weather, is pushing Slip 7 work well ahead of schedule and is saving the responsible companies money in the cleanup, said Gary Hage, project manager for Service Engineering Group in Duluth.

``It's a good situation for us. It costs about one fourth as much as trucking it in. And there will be a lot less truck traffic coming in," he said. ``It's also good for the community that we can re-use this material rather than filling in the Erie Pier disposal site."

Mike Bares, hydrogeologist for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, said his agency gave approval to move up the Slip 7 portion of the Superfund project after testing the dredge sand for size and contaminants.

``We wanted to avoid fine particles to reduce the turbidity, and we wanted to make sure it was clean," Bares said. ``We've rejected a little of it as too fine. But most of it has been good sand. The timing just worked well to move this part of the project ahead."

Additional sand will be delivered by truck and boat later in the project, and some already is stockpiled on shore.

A sediment curtain has been strung across the mouth of Slip 7 to keep water clear outside the project, Bares said. The PCA also is monitoring water quality outside the slip to ensure nothing is moving out.

``This is also giving us a preview of how well capping (contaminated sediments) really works. We're pretty new to some of this," Bares said.

Ray Skelton, environmental and government affairs director for the Duluth Seaway Port Authority, said using dredged sand helps recover some of the dredging cost and keeps the port's disposal area from filling up. It costs about \$5.50 to dredge a ton of material, and the Port Authority can recover about \$1 of that from selling the sand.

The material is generally clean and free from contaminants because it's in an area of the harbor with heavy current and frequent dredging.

``It's a great beneficial use. The quality of the sand that's coming out of the east gate basin is construction-grade. It's good stuff. We sell a lot of it," Skelton said.

In August - after a decade of studies, negotiations and debate - the PCA board gave final approval to the plan to cover

up and clean parts of the polluted Stryker Bay site in Duluth's upper harbor.

Some environmentalists opposed the cover plan, saying the entire site should be dredged and the polluted material removed and incinerated. But companies responsible for the cleanup balked at that proposal, saying it was too expensive. Some port officials also expressed concern that another deep-water harbor access is being lost.

Homeowners near the site have generally favored the plan, noting it will retain their access to the waterfront and river.

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